

## **Do not forget to be "human"!**

### **"Easter" chronicles from the slums of Calais**

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*Do you know that here is full of Italians?* The question of Sherif, an Afghan in his sixties who speaks an excellent Spanish, surprises me. It's Easter Sunday and we are in Calais, the city port 30 km away from England that now the Italian press defines as the French Lampedusa. In what sense, Sherif? Where are the Italians? Most Afghans and Pakistanis, who are in Calais to try and reach England, speak a perfect Italian, have lived in our country for three to four years and possess a residence permit for subsidiary protection, to be renewed every five years.

*So why are they doing in Calais if they already have documents in Italy?* Abdul and Mahmud, both thirty years old, who want nothing more than to work after years of suffering, discuss with us for quite a while. They are pretty sure that if the Italians were aware of their problems would do something to help them. They like Italy. They would love to live and work there. But there is no more work. They were the first to lose their jobs, and since 2012 there has been a real exodus of "Italian" Afghans towards England, France and northern Europe. Moreover their residence permit does not allow them working outside Italy.

The situation in Calais was really tense in recent days. As he approached Easter day over 2,000 desperate people, fleeing war, injustice and poverty, have been the victims of a brutal offensive of French police and State that gathered them all in a field in a peripheral and marsh land of the industrial area close to the Day Care Centre "Jules Ferry". The fields where Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranians and Egyptians lived until recently (Tioxide, Leaderprice and Gallo) have become an expanse of waste. What remains it is bleak. The atmosphere is spooky. Scattered everyday objects mingle with numerous bonfires and silence. The police informed them (the migrants) just the day before their expulsion, although the authorities have already talked about it since February. In France an order of expulsion must be notified by a judicial officer prior complaint of the house owner. But obviously, when it comes to migrants, law is not equal for everyone. It took just sending few policemen to intimidate them and drive them out. From this weekend (Easter Day) on all those

who wish to reach England from Calais will live in this huge area and far away from the town where there are no toilets or water. From 14 to 17 migrants can go to the center Jules Ferry to sip tea or coffee, explains Dina, a young local girl who works here. Or they may be accompanied to see a doctor, use the toilet and charge their mobile phones. From 17 to 19 it is the time of the distribution of the only meal they are entitled. Soon 70 showers will be active for them. Moreover a small prefabricated structure, with the capacity of one hundred seats, is welcoming those women with children in difficult situations who ask for a special help. Forty employees of the association "La vie active" alternate in the center during opening hours. Eight of them are social educators, others do not have a specific training related to the reception or mediation. Shortly, for the moment being a migrant in Calais, means being confined close to the center Jules Ferry, being entitled to one meal a day, accessing to sanitation for three hours and in few days even taking a shower.

Meanwhile it is commendable the work of the many organizations and individuals who are on the side of migrants to support them in this umpteenth hard time. Nathalie, a forty years old woman from Calais, brought her 7 years old son to spend Easter Sunday among the Sudanese people to help them build their new home. Emmaus, "Secours Catholique Caritas" and "Calais, Ouverture et Humanité" are just some of the main organizations that are helping migrants in these days to move and build new shelters in a sandy and really unworthy soil. Pierre and a dozen volunteers from Emmaus came from Reims to spend the Easter Day to build at least four cabins with wooden frame, covered with simple plastic tarps to protect from cold and rain.

*Mafia, mafia!* Safir, Egyptian in his fifties, told me he was victim of an Italian businessman with strong ties to the Mafia who exploits mostly Egyptians in logistics field work underpaying them. At this time the contractor is under investigation in Paris.

Sayes, a thirty years old Ethiopian, comes joyfully towards me. After the rites of greetings I ask him if we can do something for him. He asks me a Bible in English. Nothing more. Despite the difficulties and fatigue, faith remains the only power and the only certainty of these men and these women. Despite many huts are still under construction, three mosques with a capacity of thirty people and an Orthodox church have already been completed. It was their first thought.

"Baby, baby!". Elijah and David are 12 and 15 years old. The other Eritreans they live with tease them by calling them children. They are almost all from the capital Asmara. For them obtaining asylum is almost automatic in any European country. The dictatorial regime of Afewerki, in power since 1993, forces men and women to a semi-permanent military service, does not accepting opposition parties nor the free and independent press. Elijah, David, Daniel and others have chosen to go to England because they speak English very well and they

have been told that over there life is better. We greet Daniel, a forty years old Eritrean married man with three children he didn't talk to since last year because in his village the phone line has not arrived yet and he does not know how to communicate with his family. He tells me that "the next time we meet will be at the end of the regime in a bar in Asmara".

After years of protests, provocations and populism, the mayor and the minister Cazaneuve have got what they wanted. The more than 2,000 migrants from Calais who are trying to reach England live *ghettoized* beyond the industrial area. Here they will no longer bother anyone. Finally British tourists on vacation will be able to enjoy town and beaches peacefully. With a great foresight it has been decided to go back to the situation in 2002, when hundreds of migrants were confined in a small town west of Calais, in Sangatte.

Leaving Calais the words of Pope Francis for the last day of peace come to the mind: "*The globalization of indifference, which now weighs on the lives of so many sisters and brothers of many, asks all of us to make us architects of a globalization of solidarity and fraternity.*" The possibilities of solidarity towards these migrants are many: going there and helping build their barracks, sending gifts and money to the associations operating on site, putting pressure on our leaders to get to fairer migration laws. In short, do not forget to stay human.